

ROMANIAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE**NOTE NO. 1 TO THE ROMANIAN SUPREME COUNCIL FOR NATIONAL DEFENSE**

In the context of the first round of the presidential elections, data were obtained that revealed an aggressive promotional campaign, carried out in circumvention of national electoral legislation, as well as the exploitation of algorithms of social media platforms for **the accelerated growth** of Călin Georgescu.

I. Using TikTok to increase Călin Georgescu's notoriety

His rise in the opinion polls was determined by a **coordinated campaign** to increase his popularity, **amplified 2 weeks before** the polling date, in particular **on the TikTok platform**, which managed to ensure his victory in the first round with 22.94%.

Călin GEORGESCU was at a very low level of notoriety a few weeks before the elections. In polls on voting intention between October 30 and November 5, Călin GEORGESCU was quoted at less than 1%. In polls from **November 15-20**, he was **ranked 6th, with 6.2%** voting intention, and on **November 20-21**, polls put Călin GEORGESCU at **10.6%**.

The **massive promotion activity** involved a campaign on **TikTok**, through several coordinated accounts that actively published electoral content, both with the help of recommendation algorithms and paid promotion.

1.1 The network of accounts directly associated directly with Călin GEORGESCU's campaign initially consisted of **25,000** accounts on the TikTok platform, which became **very active two weeks before the election date**. The promotional campaign was **particularly well organized**, with the number of followers increasing significantly.

It was noted that **797** of the accounts that initially formed the support network had been created **since 2016**. They had very low activity (1%) until 11.11.2024, when the entire network was fully activated.

Of particular importance is that no shared technical resources were used and no shared IP addresses (IP sharing) were observed. In concrete terms, the TikTok accounts in question were assigned unique IP addresses, which denotes a modus operandi designed to facilitate the identification of the extent of the network based on the use of a common infrastructure (characteristic of bots).

1.2 The activity of the accounts in the network was organized Outside the TikTok platform, namely on the Telegram instant messaging application.

The Telegram channel “*Propagator- implică-te și tu*” (*Propagator - get involved*), “*Renașterea României*” (*Rebirth of Romania*), “*Hrană, Apă, Energie*” (*Food, Water, Energy*) (@propagatorcg) was identified, which has the role of **coordinating other users on the posts and video content distributed.**

The @propagatorcg subscribers received clear instructions on how to act on the accounts, recommendations on user behavior at the TikTok level, the posts that would be promoted or distributed, in terms of including specially chosen *emoji* and the name of the candidate to exploit TikTok algorithms. These were prepared in advance and instantly uploaded to TikTok.

Thus, posts encouraging followers to post certain pre-defined tags („#CG”, „#diaspora”, „#calingeorgescu”), to distribute certain videos posted on the groups, and to distribute certain videos posted on the groups, were identified on the Telegram groups, as well as indications to circumvent the verification mechanisms of the TikTok platform (screen recording and altering content to be perceived by the platform as original content).

On 24.11.2024, @propagatorcg had **1,088 subscribers**, and on 01.12.2024 it had **5,005 users**, an increase of 603 members from the previous day.

According to the data provided by TikTok on 28.11.2024, in dialog with the Romanian authorities, after the creation of the Telegram channel @propagatorcg, **76 new TikTok accounts were registered, having the exclusive role of promoting candidate Călin GEORGESCU.**

The TikTok representatives also stated that @propagatorcg was created on **June 15, 2024, and had, as of 28.11.2024, 3,755 subscribers who were trained on distributing videos and posts and leaving comments, using certain hashtags, on Facebook, YouTube and TikTok platforms.** Thereby, two patterns were detected regarding the candidate’s promotion activity:

1. 1183 accounts used, „#CG11” in all videos posted on TikTok. Out of these, 157 were registered on TikTok after the creation of the Telegram channel, and 76 were created and used exclusively with the intention of posting promotional content, the rest were associated with real people who voluntarily posted pro-Călin GEORGESCU content.

2. The accounts used a string of specific emoticons accompanied by the candidate’s name to exploit the platform’s algorithms. TIK TOK representatives identified 83 accounts that followed this pattern, which left 2912 comments (23% of which were posted by the official account of Călin GEORGESCU).

TikTok also reported that it had identified a potential network of accounts involved in manipulating public opinion in an electoral context, as well as a network of accounts affiliated with the Russian publication **Sputnik** that targeted users in Romania and Moldova.

It is interesting to note that some of the Telegram groups in which Călin GEORGESCU's supporters have coagulated **were created in September 2022**. As an example, the group *Călin Georgescu-Proiect de țară* (Călin Georgescu - Country Project) was created, where the candidate's narrative was promoted, together with four other similar Telegram groups.

1.3 In promoting Călin GEORGESCU, an extensive network of high-profile public figures on the TikTok platform (influencers) was used to promote his campaign both directly (by publicly supporting the candidate) and indirectly (through messages that appeared neutral but contained tags associated with the candidate, such as *#echilbrușiverticalitate*). Some of them intentionally did not mark the advertising as paid, in order to avoid associating the posts with election campaigning.

A non-exhaustive list of public persons who expressed their support for Călin GEORGESCU reveals the following accounts at the TikTok level: @călin.donca, @makaveli. oficial,.. @ceraselamaria1, @adrian.niculescu, @jaga.neagu, @anca.ujeniuc, Znyq:i-ife;.,,._; - @andreipypo10, @rusu.romeo, @roxanaroxi302, @corinaciriblan, @braia.robert

1.4 Creation and use of accounts falsely representing Romanian state institutions in support of Călin Georgescu

Subsequently, on the margins of the parliamentary elections of December 1, **dozens of TikTok accounts were found falsely using the SRI logo and the Anti-Terrorist Brigade (BAT)**, respectively displaying thousands of followers and over 100,000 likes.

On these accounts, **numerous images** of Romanian Police forces and BAT, taken from the public space, **were distributed**. In the comments, **appreciative posts were identified on the SRI-BAT/BAT/law enforcement institutions and in support of candidate GEORGESCU, thus falsely inducing the idea that state institutions support him**.

1.5 TikTok's conduct and relations with the Romanian authorities

On November 20, 2024, by decision no.175D, the Central Electoral Bureau (BEC) ordered *"the removal of electoral propaganda materials from the online environment depicting the candidate Călin Georgescu in the 2024 elections for the President of Romania, which do not contain the identification code of the fiscal trustee"*.

The request was sent to TikTok, via the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP), on 21.11.2024 (08:00).

On 22.11.2024 (at 13:47), **TikTok sent AEP confirmation of the removal of the postings subject to BEC Decision no. 175D of 20.11.2024, by blocking visual access to them from Romania, they remain visible in other countries and can be distributed**.

However, subsequent checks revealed that **TikTok did not delete the electoral content as requested by AEP, and it continued to be available to the Romanian public even after the end of the electoral campaign, including on election day** (in contravention of Romanian law).

Posts with purely electoral content from accounts associated with the network promoting Călin Georgescu were categorized by TikTok as **entertainment posts** and were displayed:

- unrestricted to a wide range of users, although this is **contrary to the Chinese company's own policies on political content**;

TikTok's practices have been criticized by a number of European thinktanks that have noted:

- the temptation, in the last 2 years, of far-right parties to use TikTok as their main communication channel

- lack of initiative from the platform to impose its own standards on political content, with more than 100 political advertisements identified in Germany in 2023;

- the platform's lack of transparency in relation to researchers (access to data is through the **TikTok API, which provides less data than can be obtained through public data scraping methods, and the phenomenon of the source of funding for political content cannot be systematically analyzed in the context of the little information made available through the TikTok Ad Library**).

Thus EU DisinfoLab considers TikTok's policy on the prevention of electoral misinformation as probably the least developed among social platforms, and Democracy Reporting International has described TikTok's practices as a systemic risk to public discourse and electoral processes in the EU.

- **without proper markings and outside the electoral campaign period**, aspects prohibited by Romanian electoral legislation.

As a consequence, **his visibility increased preferentially** in relation to the other candidates, whose posts were massively filtered, exponentially decreasing their online presence.

According to the data obtained from TikTok, the application's algorithm **should normally have identified the coordinated nature** of Călin GEORGESCU's campaign and restricted the activity associated with the accounts, which did not materialize.

In the current electoral context, **an analysis of the online activities subsumed to Călin GEORGESCU's promotion campaign has been initiated at the TikTok level.**

TikTok's first report on the fact that a campaign to promote Călin GEORGESCU is being conducted in the TikTok environment was made in 2020. In 2021 TikTok concluded that this was a suspicious activity.

A **massive promotional activity** was also identified on the TikTok platform, **carried out in the last two weeks in support of POT (Young People's Party)**, a sovereigntist party founded in 2023, which supports Călin GEORGESCU.

II. Financing mechanisms of Călin GEORGESCU's campaign

Candidate Călin GEORGESCU declared to the Romanian electoral authority (AEP) 0 lei electoral campaign budget, i.e. that he did not spend any money during the campaign.

The held data revealed the involvement of the TikTok account "*bogpr*", used by **the Romanian citizen Bogdan PEȘCHIR**, in financing the promotion of Călin GEORGESCU on the socialization platform.

Using the "*bogpr*" account, he made donations on TikTok of over one million euros. After becoming the subject of public debate, the involvement of "*bogpr*" in financing the promotion of Călin GEORGESCU on the platform was confirmed by TikTok representatives in dialog with the Romanian authorities on 28.11.2024.

They confirmed the identity of the user "*bogpr*" and mentioned that he made payments in the amount of **381,000 dollars**, between 24.10-24.11.2024, **to users of TikTok accounts involved in the promotion of candidate Călin GEORGESCU, including after the date of the end of the electoral campaign. These represent violations of TikTok policies and Romanian electoral legislation.**

Bogdan PEȘCHIR displays a standard of living that does not correspond to the activities carried out through the company he owns, namely DIGITAL ON-RAMP SOLUTIONS SRL Brașov, established in 2021. Prior to the establishment of the company, he worked as a programmer in entities (GLOBAYA FINTECH SRL and BITXATM TECHNOLOGY SRL, both in Brașov) which are associated with the field of **cryptocurrencies** and are owned, among others, by **Gabriel PRODĂNESCU** (who is also a citizen of South Africa, where he emigrated in 1995).

Also, the financing of the TikTok influencers was ensured through the FameUp platform (dedicated to monetizing online promotional activities), where the advertising opportunity was published, along with well-defined descriptions. One of the methods of attracting Romanian influencers to collaborate in promoting **Călin GEORGESCU's** candidacy was contacting them by e-mail by the South African company **FA Agency**, which offered them €1,000 for the distribution of a video clip made by them.